

The Mission that Transforms: A Development of Joseph's Character in Genesis 37–50¹

Josef Sykora
Northeastern Seminary

Abstract

In Genesis chapters 37–50 it is Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob, who furthers the purposes of God for his people. In chapter 37, not foreseeing the consequences, he tells his brothers of certain dreams of his that appear to speak of his future dominance in the clan. But later, in chapter 50, we see a mature Joseph who is reluctant to accept the gesture of obeisance from his siblings. Are there any indications in the story suggesting that Joseph has acquired certain traits that now permit him to react to his brothers in a more life-giving way? I will argue that the story can be read in this way, and propose that both Joseph's submission to those who had authority over him, and his ability to come to terms with his own feelings, enabled him to fulfill his God-given mission in a life-enhancing way.

Reasons for Joseph's Development in Genesis 37–50

In Genesis 37–50 the purposes of God for Israel center on Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob. Several chapters earlier, in Genesis 12, YHWH had chosen Abraham, assured him of his presence and blessing, and promised him that his offspring will possess the land of Canaan (Gen 12:7). The son who eventually will carry this Abrahamic promise into the future is not Abraham's firstborn Ishmael, but his younger sibling Isaac, to be born of Sarah (Gen 17:19–21). This replacing of the firstborn son with a younger brother becomes a characteristic feature of Israel's identity, and carries over even into the last section of the book,² where it

1 This article represents a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association/Northeastern Seminary joint theological conference, "Participating in God's Mission," held at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, NY, on March 19, 2016.

2 Among recent works, note especially Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007); and Benedikt Hensel, *Die Vertauschung des Erstgeburtssegens in der Genesis: Eine Analyse der narrativ-theologischen Grundstruktur des ersten Buches der Tora*, BZAW 423 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

is Joseph who is the object both of Jacob's (Gen 37:3–4) and God's favor (Gen 37:5–11). Joseph is given dreams, apparently speaking of his future authority within the family and dominance over his brothers, which he appears to enjoy telling to his older siblings (Gen 37:5, 9). Yet, when the long narrative reaches its end, Joseph is reluctant to accept the gesture of obeisance from his brothers. When the brothers came and threw themselves down before him, suggesting they will become his slaves (Gen 50:18), he exclaimed: "Am I in the place of God? . . . Do not be afraid, I will provide for you and your children" (Gen 50:19–21). What has changed in Joseph's character that he is eventually able to embody God-given dreams in a life-enhancing way? Are there any indications in the text that Joseph has developed in the story beyond his youthful and seemingly vainglorious years?³

Although the narrative nowhere makes explicit such a growth in Joseph's character, I will argue that the Joseph story can be read in this way. Specifically, I will discuss two episodes in Joseph's story which may be interpreted as equipping him with those necessary traits that will enable him to fulfill God's purposes in a way that increases, rather than diminishes, human life and wellbeing.

Learning to Submit

The first such episode is that which takes place when Joseph dwells in Potiphar's house in chapter 39, after having been brought to Egypt by a group of merchants and bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard (Gen 39:1). He becomes one of his slaves, but Potiphar quickly discerns Joseph's extraordinary abilities and gives him the oversight of his entire household (Gen 39:2–6a). Close attention to the text reveals even starker contrast between Joseph's tragic enslavement upon his transition to Egypt and his elevated position in Potiphar's house. While at the beginning of chapter 39 he is bought "from the hand of the Ishmaelites" (מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמָעֵלִים) (Gen 39:1), as the story progresses Potiphar puts everything he owns "in his hand" (בְּיָדוֹ) and places him over Potiphar's house (Gen 39:4).⁴ Such a reversal, which in fact occurs twice more in the story—when Joseph is imprisoned (Gen 39:22) and later when he is brought to Pharaoh (Gen 41:40)—is a direct result of YHWH's being with Joseph and God's continued blessing (Gen 39:2–6a). The divine name "YHWH" is rare in the Joseph cycle, appearing mostly here in this episode, where it is found eight times (Gen 39:2, 3[2x], 5[2x], 21, 23[2x]). This cluster of occurrences, coupled with the emphasis that it is YHWH who blesses Potiphar because of Joseph, alerts the reader that

3 In focusing on the development of Joseph's character in the story, I do not wish to diminish the way in which the narrative highlights God's providence in Joseph's life—a facet perhaps most famously brought out by Gerhard von Rad in "The Story of Joseph," in *God at Work in Israel*, trans. John H. Marks (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), 19–35.

4 The word "hand" (יָד) functions as one of the keywords of chapter 39, occurring here six times.

the future successes of Joseph will also be due to YHWH's presence and blessing.⁵ Joseph thus displays the characteristics of a chosen person that began to be seen at least with Abraham.

However, in the middle of chapter 39 this success seems to be endangered when Joseph is tempted by Potiphar's wife (Gen 39:6b–20a). Joseph succeeds in this test. Although he is later imprisoned, the reader knows that he withstood the advances of Potiphar's wife, despite her accusations that it was the Hebrew slave who urged her to sleep with him. The cloak found in her hand (Gen 39:13—Joseph's life is again in the hand of somebody else!) is not evidence of Joseph's sexual promiscuity but of her callousness and power.⁶

It might be helpful at this point to focus our attention at the reasons offered by Joseph for not yielding to the woman's temptation, while he still had a chance to verbally respond to her advances.⁷ Here one gets a rare window into Joseph's attitudes and motives. Joseph refuses the offer of sexual pleasure, and says to his master's wife:

“Look, my master has no concern for anything in the house, and he has given everything that he has into my hand. There is none greater in this house than I am, nor has he withheld anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (Gen 39:8–9)

Commentators usually find embedded in this speech two reasons for Joseph's ability to maintain his moral uprightness.⁸ First, Joseph recognizes that although everything in Potiphar's house is given into his hand, this “everything” does not include his master's wife. This exclusion from Joseph's realm of authority and responsibility is not made explicit in the preceding text, although verse 6 does mention that Potiphar kept in his own hands “the bread that he ate,” which

5 Westermann helpfully reorients the repeated occurrence of the divine title “YHWH” toward the text's function. The reference to YHWH may create a theological introduction to the Joseph story, through which the narrator highlights that YHWH was the source of Joseph's achievements. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 62.

6 Nevertheless, the rabbinic exegesis has been traditionally more willing to attribute some fault to Joseph for allowing himself to fall into this temptation. Did he curl his hair to be beautiful and hence attractive for Potiphar's wife? Did he know that none of the servants were inside of the house and he decided to enter it nevertheless? See Rashi's comments in M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, eds., *The Pentateuch with the Commentary of Rashi: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Silbermann, 1972), 191–92.

7 When Potiphar's wife approaches Joseph the second time (Gen 39:11–12), there is no chance to put forward argument; it's time to run.

8 See, for example, Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, MLBS (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 407–408; and Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, Rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1972), 364–65. In fact, both seem to consider the moral problem with adultery the more significant reason for Joseph's refusal.

might be an idiom for Potiphar's private affairs.⁹ In any case, the exclusion of Potiphar's wife can easily be deduced from the broader context. A servant's responsibilities do not typically extend as far as pleasing his master's wife.

The second reason given by commentators for Joseph's ability to maintain his integrity is his unwillingness to sin against God. This then prompts them to find some scriptural evidence to substantiate this reasoning. For example, although in his detailed commentary on the Joseph story Jürgen Ebach states that the first reason—that is, Joseph's acknowledgment of the limitation of his oversight—is the more important of the two, he nevertheless spends several paragraphs trying to establish a pentateuchal basis for seeing adultery as a sin.¹⁰

Contrary to this approach, I would like to suggest that Joseph's speech reveals only one reason for his restraint. Joseph does not want to breach the trust of his master, and *this is* what he considers to be the sin against God. At least, this is the *prima facie* reason indicated in chapter 39. The beginning of the chapter stresses that Potiphar left all that he had in Joseph's hands (vv. 4, 5, and 6), because "YHWH caused all that [Joseph] did to prosper in his hand" (v. 3). God's blessing was the primary cause why Potiphar entrusted everything that he owned into Joseph's hands. Breaching Potiphar's trust meant breaching YHWH's trust. These two are intrinsically connected. This being said, it does not mean that one cannot look for moral reasons or scriptural support for basing Joseph's restraint on his fear of adultery. Nevertheless, it seems to me that founding it on Joseph's submission to Potiphar—which, in turn, acknowledges some limitation to his otherwise vast area of responsibility—is more explicitly grounded in the narrative.¹¹

This reason for Joseph's restraint, in my opinion, shows something fundamental concerning the growth of his character. It is interesting that in all three successive realms of Joseph's authority—Potiphar's house, the prison, and the Egyptian court—he is always second-in-command (Gen 39:6, 23; 41:43). He is never the sole head of any of these places, but always needs to submit to somebody higher than him. And he honors this limitation and need for submission meticulously. Sometimes, as in Potiphar's house, this helps him to maintain his moral integrity, even though as a result he ends up descending to yet another pit,¹² namely into

9 On this see Lothar Ruppert, *Die Josephserzählung der Genesis: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie der Pentateuchquellen*, SANT 11 (München: Kösel, 1965), 46.

10 Ebach finally settles on Deut 22:22 as the most suitable pretext: "If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman" (NRSV). See Jürgen Ebach, *Genesis 37–50*, HThKAT 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 180.

11 Similarly also Claus Westermann, *Joseph: Eleven Bible Studies on Genesis*, trans. Omar Kaste (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 26–27.

12 Levenson considers Joseph to be an exemplar of symbolic death and resurrection. Joseph's threefold descent—into the pit, to slavery in Egypt, and to his imprisonment after the incident with Potiphar's wife—represents a series of downward steps that eventually have a transforming effect on his life (Levenson, *Death*, 150–52).

prison (see Gen 40:15). Sometimes, as in the house of Pharaoh, this is exemplified perhaps more negatively, as he buys up all of the land for Pharaoh, his master (Gen 47:20)—showing that even this positive trait may have its dark side.¹³ Nevertheless, it demonstrates, in my opinion, something indispensable for anyone who is given grandiose visions. He who is chosen to rule must learn to submit.

Learning to Be Vulnerable

The second episode that may be interpreted as contributing to Joseph's development is that of the reconciliation of Jacob's family (Gen 42–45), the other major subplot of the Joseph cycle. When the impoverished brothers unknowingly appear before Joseph, now the Egyptian vizier, to beg for food, Joseph has his chance for revenge. He employs a number of harsh measures (Gen 42:7 says that "he spoke harshly to them"), which can be variously interpreted. They can indeed be seen as an act of retaliation by which Joseph repays his brothers with suffering similar to his own.¹⁴ Or, they can be viewed as a series of tests (Joseph himself characterizes his actions as a "test"—see Gen 42:15), implemented so that Joseph both learns of his father's and Benjamin's fate, and discovers whether his estranged siblings have undergone any inner change.¹⁵ More pertinent to our present discussion, however, is the self-control Joseph exhibits, which accompanies his severe treatment of his brothers.

When Joseph decides to keep Simeon in his custody until the rest of the brothers return with Benjamin, the brothers begin to reminisce about their former mistreatment of Joseph, which they consider to be the cause of their present difficulties (Gen 42:21). This is especially true of Reuben, who accuses his siblings of not heeding his objections, and voices his opinion that the present enslavement of one of them is directly connected with their previous enslavement of Joseph (Gen 42:22). When Joseph hears this comment (unbeknownst to them, he did not need a translator to understand their Hebrew—Gen 42:23), he turns away and weeps (Gen 42:24). He then returns to the brothers and resumes his conversation with them.

13 A number of authors evaluate Joseph's enslavement of the Egyptians negatively. See, for example, Berel Dov Lerner, "Joseph the Unrighteous," *Judaism* 38 (1989): 278–81; Yiu-Wing Fung, *Victim and Victimizer: Joseph's Interpretation of His Destiny*, JSOTSup 308 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), esp. 38; and Aaron Wildavsky, "Survival Must not be Gained through Sin: The Moral of the Joseph Stories Prefigured through Judah and Tamar," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 62 (1994): 37–48. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the story itself never makes such a negative evaluation explicit. Joseph enslaved the Egyptians in response to their own proposal (Gen 47:19), and they viewed this action of his as saving their lives (Gen 47:25).

14 Consult especially Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 94; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 424; and Peter D. Miscall, "The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 6 (1978): 28–40, esp. 34. Similarly, replete with psychological insights, Pete Wilcox, *Living the Dream - Joseph for Today: A Dramatic exposition of Genesis 37–50* (London: Paternoster, 2007), 57.

15 See, for example, von Rad, *Genesis*, 30; Westermann, *Joseph*, 66; and Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 353.

Something similar happens again later when the brothers return with Benjamin and Joseph finally sees (after a long time, or for the first time ever) his mother Rachel's youngest son. Joseph is overwhelmed with emotion,¹⁶ and hastily leaves the room to weep again (Gen 43:30). He returns to eat a meal with his brothers only after he regains control of himself again (the Hebrew verb אָפַק is used here in Gen 43:31).

The series of Joseph's emotional breakdowns finally culminates during the long speech Judah makes (Gen 44:18–34) after Benjamin is accused of stealing Joseph's silver cup (Gen 44:11–17). Both the theft itself and the false accusation were, of course, instigated by Joseph himself (Gen 44:1–5). When Joseph hears, during the course of Judah's speech, that Judah is willing to substitute himself for Benjamin—a brother loved by their father more than he (Judah) is—and to take upon himself the punishment of slavery in place of Benjamin, Joseph can no longer control himself (Gen 45:1—the phrase uses the same Hebrew word אָפַק as 43:31). He sends everybody else away so that he is left alone with his siblings. However, the outburst of emotion is so overwhelming, and Joseph cries so loud, that the whole of Pharaoh's household hears it (Gen 45:2). That which was meant to remain private—the depth of Joseph's hurt, and his bond and re-connection with his brothers—thus becomes public.

This highly emotional situation in which Joseph weeps and Pharaoh's whole house hears it may be interpreted in at least two complementary ways. On the one hand, as Joseph's self-disclosure to his stunned siblings reveals, this is a pivotal moment in which the breach within the family begins to heal.¹⁷ Although the estrangement is not entirely removed after Joseph's revelation of his identity (Gen 45:5)—which is only natural in close relationships that have been deeply fractured—the brothers are once again part of Joseph's intimate circle. He does not need to hide the tears that betray his personal connection to, and emotional bond with, the impoverished Hebrew travelers; rather he can be vulnerable together with them.¹⁸

On the other hand, from now on Joseph freely weeps on several occasions: when he further talks to his brothers (Gen 45:14–15), when he finally meets his father (Gen 46:29), when Jacob dies (Gen 50:1), and when his brothers ask his

16 The phrase כִּי־נִכְמְרוּ רַחֲמָיו אֵלָיו (‘‘for he was overcome with compassion for his brother’’) points to a strong emotion on the part of Joseph towards his younger sibling. The verb כָּמַר, appearing only in *Niphal* in the Old Testament (1 Kgs 3:26; Hos 11:8), depicts an intense parental affection.

17 Benno Jacob focuses on this aspect of Joseph's emotional reaction when he underscores that Joseph weeps for his brothers (and especially Benjamin) and his father, but never because of his own misfortunes. See Benno Jacob, *Der erste Buch der Torah Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934), 210–11.

18 Bosworth suggests that weeping in several recognition scenes in the Joseph cycle illuminates the attachment that Joseph felt towards his brothers. See David A. Bosworth, ‘‘Weeping in Recognition Scenes in Genesis and *Odyssey*,’’ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77 (2015): 619–39.

forgiveness after their father's death (Gen 50:17). The emotional upheaval brought about by Judah's speech seems to have changed something in Joseph's behavior.

It is an intriguing observation that as long as Joseph is in control of himself, he is also in control of others.¹⁹ However, when he loses his self-control, he also relinquishes his dominance over his brothers. Joseph's softer approach to his brothers goes hand in hand with the loss of his ability to completely control himself. This openness to his own vulnerability and emotions is not something that he has sought, but was forced upon him.²⁰ Joseph is caught in the web of his own stratagem, which eventually reveals not only the inner attitude of his brothers, but also the condition of his own heart. Seen in this light, it may be possible that one's mission can be carried out in a life-enhancing way when one comes to terms with past pain and becomes more open to one's own vulnerability.²¹

The Mission of God and Godly Character

By way of conclusion, I will now attempt to bring closer to the realms of practical life and theology the two foregoing observations. Joseph's dreams, which he relates to his older brothers in chapter 37, might have been brought to life in various ways. They could have been appropriated in a crude and dominant way—in a manner similar to the brothers' exclamation: "Will you indeed *rule* over us?" (Gen 37:8). Or, they could have been lived out in a more nurturing manner, one more akin to service than to domination. The end of the story depicts Joseph taking the latter approach, because the mature Joseph has acquired characteristic traits that are needed for accomplishing God's mission in a godly way.

The plans and visions that God has for us may be brought to fulfillment in various ways. Therefore, equally as important as God's mission itself is the kind of godly character that can bring God-given dreams to fruition in a way that increases, rather than decreases, life and wellbeing. Especially for a person who is destined to lead, it is crucial to learn and maintain an appropriate posture of submission. Although Joseph's dreams clearly speak of his leadership, he always submits to somebody higher than himself. To be subordinated to somebody else seems to function so as to provide vital checks and balances to those in authority, and Joseph's story is a good example of it.

19 For the connection between Joseph's self-control and his control over his brothers, see Ebach, *Genesis*, 385.

20 Ebach attempts to complement Jacob's observation by stressing that Joseph's tears also betray his own hurt and grief. See Ebach, *Genesis*, 384–85. On the issue of Joseph's emotional development consider Fred Guyette, "Joseph's Emotional Development," *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 32 (2004): 181–88. Joseph's vulnerability is explored in David Zucker, "Seize the Moment," *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 37 (2009): 197–99.

21 This is, in fact, in contrast to Josephus's evaluation of Joseph, which makes him, curiously, a man of reason (*Ant.* 2.198), devoid of emotions. Josephus mentions Joseph's tears in Gen 42:24 (*Ant.* 2.109) and Gen 43:30 (*Ant.* 2.123), but avoids them later on (see *Ant.* 2.160, 2.166, 2.184).

Similarly, Joseph's willingness to be more vulnerable in the presence of others—although initially this is forced upon him—seems to be an important element in Joseph's ability to be more compassionate in his dealings with those who have hurt him in the past. Perhaps when we recognize that we cannot sufficiently control ourselves, we become more open to the recognition that we cannot control others either.

Fulfilling God's mission thus seems to be interwoven with the need for, and the actual forming of, godly character. It takes time—and often involves a painful process of maturing—to become the sort of people who build God's kingdom in a life-enhancing way.